

Testimony
Submitted to the
Education Committee

March 10, 2008

Raised Bill # 5821 An Act Concerning Distance Learning

Good afternoon, Senator Gaffey, Representative Fleischman and members of the Education Committee. My name is Bruce Douglas. I represent the Regional Education Service Center Alliance, an organization that represents all of the school districts in the State of Connecticut.

I am here to comment on Raised Bill # 5821, An Act Concerning Distance Learning.

General Background:

1. Since 2003, RESCs have provided local school districts with access to online courses for high school and advanced middle school students through the CT Virtual High School Consortium and other online providers.
2. As of the 2007/2008 academic year, 45 schools have elected to purchase membership in the CT VHS Consortium through their local budgets, and a total of 871 students have completed or are currently enrolled in classes.
3. In addition to the supplemental courses provided by the CT VHS Consortium, the RESCs also provide online courses and programs for credit recovery and alternative education. 25 schools are currently participating.
4. This level of participation is a clear indication that school districts recognize the importance of offering online courses for their students.

Currently:

1. Last year's legislation, funding the development of a K-12 program through the Connecticut Distance Learning Consortium (CTDLC), is further indication of the support for online programming for students throughout Connecticut.
2. We applaud this commitment. However, there are a number of misconceptions that need to be clarified and issues that must be examined:

- a) The most recent press release regarding online programs suggests that this is the first time students in Connecticut have had access to high quality online courses. In fact, schools and students have participated in Connecticut Virtual High School courses since 2001.
- b) The history of the RESCs focus on Pre-K – 12 education uniquely positions the RESC Alliance to continue to provide high quality distance learning opportunities for CT students.
- c) The current Connecticut VHS Consortium offered by the Connecticut RESCs is scientifically based, and supported by a number of education organizations including:
 - National Education Association (NEA)
 - American Association for School Administrators (AASA)
 - North American Council on Online Learning (NACOL)
 - United States Distance Learning Consortium (USDLA)

Conclusion:

The language of Raised Bill #5821 would require local and regional school districts to participate in the CT Virtual Learning Center, and therefore would undermine the on-going successful operations of the RESCs, and limit the options and opportunities for CT schools and students.

We respectfully request that the language in Raised Bill #5821 not be amended as recommended, but be amended to read "Local and regional school districts may, (rather than shall) participate as part of the consortium."

Respectfully Submitted,

Bruce E. Douglas, Ph.D.
Capitol Region Education Council

Proposed Language
Raised Bill #5821
An Act Concerning Distance Learning

Section 1. Section 25 of public act 07-3 of the June special session is repealed and the following is substituted in lieu thereof (Effective July 1, 2008):

For the fiscal years ending June 30, 2008, and June 30, 2009, the Connecticut Distance Learning Consortium shall deliver on-line courses, including but not limited to, advanced placement courses, developed in conjunction with or approved by the Departments of Education and Higher Education, the Regional Educational Services Centers or other agencies interested in the delivery of on-line courses to public schools, provided the Department of Education approves content that is offered for academic credit in a public school. Such courses shall be approved by "The College Board" as required to carry the Advanced Placement ("AP") designation. Local and regional school districts may participate as part of the consortium.



Public Testimony
Select Committee on Children
March 10, 2008

Raised Bill No. 5260 An Act Implementing the Governor's Budget Recommendations

Senator Gaffey, Representative Fleischman and distinguished Committee members:

My name is Juleen Flanigan. I am Director of Early Childhood Services for the Education Connection in Litchfield and I am co-chair of the Connecticut Early Childhood Alliance, a coalition of roughly 50 organizations that provide an array of services to thousands of young Connecticut children.

I am joined by Jessica Stewart, School Readiness Facilitator for the City of Meriden and a member of the Alliance.

During the last session of the Connecticut General Assembly, the legislature and Governor Rell worked together to pass important legislation that greatly expanded school readiness opportunities for children in Connecticut. The Alliance applauded adoption of a two year plan that:

- Expanded access to families and young children
- Adopted a reimbursement rate increase schedule that would retain and attract outstanding professionals
- Provided adequate administrative funds to ensure quality programming

Unfortunately, in less than a year, the plan is unraveling. Instead of meeting the promises of the two year budget, the Governor's proposed fiscal blueprint

- Cuts \$2.1 million in School Readiness funds.
- Reneges on promised rate increases for providers
- Freezes administrative dollars

OPM is proposing that any additional funds go to increased access, or "slots" and that provider and administration rates remain frozen.

Without adequate funding to pay for salaries, health care costs, heating bills and administration, the current reimbursement rate is often less than the cost of providing quality child readiness services. Without dealing with rates and administrative costs -- along with "slots" -- providers are financially unable to expand.

The CT Early Childhood Alliance supports the development of high quality early childhood care and education systems targeted at Connecticut's most needy children.

By ignoring the School Readiness Plan, OPM is compromising quality and the long term stability of the program.

We hope that you and your colleagues will take this opportunity -- understanding the difficult nature of this budget year -- to do your best for this important program.

My name is Jessica Stewart

I'd like to touch on the specifics of the bill before you.

In Section 5 of the bill, proposed language changes deal with reimbursement rates for school readiness. First, let me say that this is an unworkable formula. While School Readiness Advocates applaud the change of the base rate for \$6925 to \$8025, it still fall short of the planned rate increases that are part of the State School readiness plan.

Moreover, by allowing the Department of Education to increase rates up to \$8266, based on allocating 50% of unspent funds, we create an unworkable financial model. I can't hire new teachers based on a possible rate increase, and when the rate can be readjusted downward to the \$8025 base, it is in no way predictable.

Keep in mind, the rate increase would depend on the amount of unallocated funds. We have about 7700 full - day slots, in order to raise the rates to \$8266, even for 6 months, that is an increase of $\$120.48 \text{ per month} \times 7700 \text{ children} \times 6 \text{ months} = \$5,566,176$. There is no way that amount will be unallocated, and if it is, SDE is only allowed to use 50% of it.

This past year with the amount of unallocated funds, programs had the potential to \$20 per child/per year, that works out to \$1.67 per month. For a program of 50 children, that is \$501 basically in a bonus for 6 months and no guarantee they will get it for next year.

I ask that you take the opportunity to fix this language. Return rates into the legislative language in a clear manner and then build the budget appropriately.

And please remember that at the end of the day, these programs are like a business, albeit a business with no huge corporate profits. But we are trying to achieve maximum access and highest quality for a given set of revenues.

When revenues are cut, or flat, or unpredictable, quality is hard to maintain and very difficult to expand.

Thank you for your attention.

